

## PATRICK EDWARD DOVE ON THE PUBLIC APPROPRIATION OF RENT

Elements of Political Science, pp. 323-330

Several special advantages would attend the allocation of the rents of the soil to the nation.

*First.*—All Customs and Excise might be abolished. This would permit a perfectly free trade with all countries, and a perfectly free trade would unite the various nations in a bond of amity which would not be the less secure because attended by commercial and pecuniary advantage. It would also set at liberty all persons engaged in the collection of customs, preventive service, &c., and as these are utterly unproductive in their present occupation, the nation would make a clear profit of their future labours.

*Second.*—It would make one simple tax, which could be collected without expense, as the renters of the soil should be ordered to pay the rents into district exchequers, and be accountable for all expenses if they did not do so.

*Third.*—It would unite the manufacturing and agricultural classes into one common interest. The more the manufactures, the more the rents of the soil would increase, and the greater would be the national revenue; and the greater the revenue, the more would be expended on public works, which would still further increase the facilities for manufacture. The greater the revenue, the *better* it would be for the nation; whereas now, the greater the revenue, the worse for the nation.

*Fourth.*—It would secure the utmost possible production that the soil was capable of affording. Millions of acres in England, Ireland and Scotland are uncultivated, either because the proprietors are already so wealthy that they can afford to leave large tracts of land in parks, game preserves, or game muirs, or because the land, although capable of supporting a population, is not capable of producing sufficient rent to render the rent an object to the wealthy landlord. Hence the Highlands of Scotland are rapidly becoming depopulated.

*Fifth.*—It would eminently tend to secure the education of the people; because—as the State would be directly interested in the labours of every man, and an educated population would always be more productive than an ignorant population—the State would immediately have a direct interest in raising the character of the people; in suppressing all that was detrimental to their welfare; in encouraging skill, industry, and talent, and consequently, in providing the fullest possible instruction for the whole nation; for the more the people were educated, the more intelligent would all labour become, and the more would the national revenue increase under the influence of intelligent labour.

*Sixth.*—It would secure to every labourer his share of the previous labours of the community. It is quite evident that a greater amount of outlay has been made on the island of Great Britain than on any other part of the world of similar extent. In harbours, roads, railroads, land improvements, houses, towns, &c., &c., England is unequalled. Yet the labourer who inherits all these facilities is not so well off as in Arkansas or Wisconsin, where no capital has been previously expended. This in itself is a sufficient proof that there is something wrong in the very construction of society; for undoubtedly a man born in a country where thousands of millions have been expended in rendering the country more suitable for man's requirements, ought to find his labour better remunerated than in a country that remains in a state of nature. All the previous expenditure of Great Britain goes to swell the landlord's rent, instead of tending to improve the condition of the labourer. On the contrary, if the rents were allocated to the nation, the condition of each man would improve, not merely through his own labours, but through the labours of all who had gone before him, which is fair and

just, and which, in fact, constitutes a *nation*. Only under such circumstances can there be any moral obligation on one generation to defray the debts or liabilities incurred by a previous generation, for a *national debt* may morally be a debt on the *PROPERTY* of the country (the property, for instance, having been preserved from the effects of foreign invasion), but a national debt can never be morally a debt on those who inherit nothing but their labour.

*Seventh.*—The allocation of the rents of the soil to the nation is the only possible means by which a *just* distribution of the created wealth can be effected. It is true that this is not the only requisite—for a systematic co-operation in the whole field of labour is also needful—but is the first main requisite, the first necessary arrangement of society which would prevent the profits of labour from escaping, as they now continually do, from the labourers to a class that labours not, yet constantly increases in wealth. So long as the rents of the soil are allocated to individuals, there is a continual drain upon the natural profits of labour—a drain that perpetually condemns the unskilled labourer to receive no more than a maintenance, a drain that robs industry of its true reward, and that only tends to swell the revenues of a small number of families who could be removed from the nation without leaving the nation one shilling the poorer. But if, on the contrary, the rents of the soil were allocated to the nation—that is, to the whole associated community—the condition of the labourer would continually improve, because he would inherit a continually improving country. Every expenditure upon the country, if judiciously made, would make the country produce *more* with the same amount of labour, exactly as the improvement of a machine enables it to do more work with the same expenditure of human labour—and, in fact, the soil of a country is only a vast and complicated machine that manufactures, under human skill and labour, the various necessities and luxuries of human existence. Now, if England be the most improved machine in the known world, the labourer in England ought to receive a higher reward than elsewhere—and for this reason, that he *produces* more with the same amount of labour. But so long as mere labour is separated from what it produces, it never can receive its legitimate reward—nor would its remuneration rise even if the productions were a thousand times greater than they are. The labourer would receive only his maintenance, and the extra profits would go to the landowner and the capitalist.

And *Finally*, It is the law of God, as declared in the constitution of the terrestrial world, and the law of Christianity, as declared in the written Scriptures, that the industrious man should be rich, and that the man who labours not should be poor. The whole economy of Britain is a direct infringement of this great law of property—of this great and fundamental principle which God established for the economical government of the world, when he made the earth to yield its riches in return for human labour. The richest men in England are those who do *not* labour, and who never did labour. And their wealth is secured in such a manner that it descends from generation to generation, and goes on constantly increasing without any exertion on their own part. Were they to sleep for a hundred years, they would wake more wealthy than ever; and if they did wake, they would wake only to encumber the industry of the country, to retard its progress, to prevent the amendment of its institutions, and to maintain a party warfare against its real prosperity. As a class they are antagonistic to industry, enemies to freedom and to progress, barriers to the civilisation of the world, living on the fruits of other men's labours, yet hating the toil which alone endows them with wealth. They are the evil remnants of the feudal system, who, in their faded power, have sunk into the bribers and corrupters of the electors of the country. They are the fatal heritage which France was obliged to

remove, and which America, happily for herself, has never known. They are the true "*surplus population*"—ever consuming, nothing producing—fed, clothed, and sheltered at the expense of the nation, and returning to the nation nothing but hindrance to its welfare.

Such a system—a shilling a day to a labourer who *does* labour, and a thousand pounds a day to a lord who does *not* labour—such a system contains within itself either the elements of national decay, or the elements of national disaster. Either the nation must be sacrificed to the landed interest, or the landed interest (composed of thirty or thirty-five thousand families in Great Britain) must be sacrificed to the interests of the nation. Either the population will found or seek new countries where labour shall meet with a more equitable reward, or a war of classes will ultimately ensue, having for its theme, not *liberty*, as in former days, but *property*. If the population diminish—and it seems already to have that tendency—England must relatively decay, and, notwithstanding all her wealth, fall into the rear of those younger nations, where the spirit of man is esteemed of more importance than the mere wealth he can create. And if, on the contrary, the labourers of England go on increasing as heretofore—the wealth of the few standing out continually in stronger and stronger contrast with the poverty and degradation of the many—there must come a time when the classes will enter into a struggle of which none can foresee the results. It may be a peaceable struggle, but for the time it must be attended by those disasters which—like the fevers that cure a long course of constitutional derangement—bring many latent evils to the surface, disfigure the aspect of society, and for a time engender a tumultuous life of present suffering—although, it *may be*, of future health.

The great requisite, then, is to return to the laws of Nature, of Providence, of God—to let the skilful and industrious man be rich, and not to accord wealth to those who produce nothing for the welfare of mankind. If, as I have endeavoured to prove, the rents of the soil are the only common profits of the whole labours of the community, the rents of the soil are the only legitimate source of taxation—the only possible source from which the revenues of the nation can equitably be derived. To tax labour is to disunite society—it makes the nation only an aggregation of unassociated individuals. To tax the rents of the soil is to unite society—it makes the nation a community bound together by the ties of a common interest, and a common welfare. This is the true, and the only true, theory of a *Nation*—that the soil belongs to it in perpetuity, and never can be alienated from it; and that he who will give the greatest rent for the soil becomes its cultivator, and pays the rent to the nation for the benefit of the whole community. Then, but not till then, will labour reap its natural reward—the reward appointed by Providence in the divine constitution of the terrestrial economy. Then will the welfare of one be the welfare of all—then will men be banded together by a true citizenship—and then will the first great step be taken towards that mighty brotherhood which springs from our common parentage, and which is at once the promise and the prophecy of the Christian faith:—

"And man to man the world ower  
Shall brothers be, an' a' that."

[This remarkably clear statement by Patrick Edward Dove on the nature and function of rent is probably not so familiar to our readers as other extracts from his writings, and the belief that it has not been noticed in any land reform literature of recent years is our excuse for printing it in full. The *ELEMENTS OF POLITICAL SCIENCE* was published in 1854, four years after the better-known *THEORY OF HUMAN PROGRESSION*, recently popularised in a cheap edition, abridged by the late Miss Julia A. Kellogg, of Orange, New Jersey. But the later book is of equal historic value and worthy of the same attention.

The above passage is open to little comment by way of criticism, except that Dove does not show how the rent of land should be allocated to the nation, nor is it clear whether he would have obliged landholders to pay not only the rents they were actually receiving but also the rents they might receive, whether their land was used or not. He does not indicate that his policy would directly raise wages, in addition to procuring for the labourer the indirect advantage of an equal share of the rents collected by the State. In fact, the political and economic field was not fully cultivated by Dove or by any of the other precursors of Henry George, whose contribution in this connection was that he correlated the law of rent and the law of wages, and so solved the economic problem. And as a practical reformer he formulated the easy and rational plan whereby existing taxing machinery might be employed for appropriating rent by the taxation of land values and abolishing all other taxes, without involving a needless shock to present customs and habits of thought or a needless extension of governmental machinery. While the rent so appropriated would be devoted to public purposes, just as the proceeds of the present (unjust) taxes are employed, the effect would be at the same time to liberate industry, to cause all land to be put to its best use, to reduce rent to a just level, and *necessarily* to increase wages.

We cannot blame the feudal system for our present ills, nor is America any better for not having experienced that system. It is the lesson of *PROGRESS AND POVERTY* that, given the right of individuals to appropriate rent, any country will suffer the "fatal heritage" of more and more unequal distribution of wealth caused by the natural increase in rent and by the speculation in land which the expectation of future increase engenders. Dove evidently regarded America as a country free from landed privileges, but it never was. Conditions in America and in all civilised countries to-day prove that the law of rent knows no geographical boundaries.—Editor, *LAND VALUES*.]

The basic evil in the economic condition to-day in our own and in other countries is that, while valuable land is all "taken up," there are vast quantities that are not in use, but merely held for speculation. This is the natural result of the present taxation system which fosters speculation at the expense of trade, building, manufacturing and agriculture. The taxation of land values would incline things the other way. It would foster useful trade and industry at the expense of speculation.

To be more specific, I believe that the land-values tax, by correcting this radically wrong condition, would make it easier to own and keep a home with some ground around it; easier to own and run a well-kept and developing farm; easier to establish and operate a manufacturing, mercantile, transportation or other useful business; to diminish the overcrowding of cities and to do away with slums; to make preventive medicine effective; to reduce rents, lower the cost of living and raise wages; and besides all this would tend to increase the comforts and security of life for all who usefully participate in the work of the world, whether by hand, brain, or capital—whether in city or country. It should make us a nation of landowners and home-owners. There is land enough.

As an initial step in this fundamental solution of the tax problem and the business problem, I would suggest changing the laws so as to permit cities and towns by local option to vote as fast as they wish to do so, to stop taxing personal property and improvements on or in land, or to tax them at lower rates than site or location values. The experience thus gained can be depended upon to point the way to subsequent steps.

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